

**BALANCING FREEDOM AND UNITY:
JOHN CARLISLE KILGO AND THE UNIFICATION OF
METHODISM IN AMERICA**

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The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a time of great social transition in the United States, particularly in the American South. In the preceding decades, the Methodist Episcopal Church had split multiple times. The main concerns were the division of power in the denomination and conflicting views regarding slavery. Around the turn of the twentieth century, however, rapid industrial expansion connected the North and South in new ways. In this context, the competing factions of Methodism seemed to stand against progress, and denominational leaders began to discuss how to improve relationships. Some went so far as to propose a formal reunion of Methodism in the United States. John Carlisle Kilgo (1861-1922) was an early supporter of reunification, but by the end of his life, he spoke against formal proposals to unite the denominations. Why did Kilgo shift his position regarding the unification of Methodism? Was there a core shift in his way of thinking or had the world changed around him?

Though Kilgo thought that the reunification of Methodism in America would provide a solid platform from which the church could speak to a world that was undergoing rapid economic expansion, his desire to protect the autonomy of the individual led him to oppose reunification plans that would subject the weaker southern churches to dominance by the northern churches. Kilgo did not oppose unification *per se*, but he did oppose the specific plans that gained the widest support among Methodists during his lifetime.

Kilgo believed that southern influence within a reunited Methodism could have significant impact upon the moral tenor of the nation. He wanted to see the strengths of his native region given an opportunity to influence the direction of the country as a whole in its advancement and progress, even though "southern" thought of the time was popularly perceived as somewhat inward-turning. Characteristic of those regional strengths, he believed, were faith and hard work. However, when Kilgo perceived that reunification plans did not offer a sufficiently significant role to such attributes, he spoke out against the formal union of Methodism. Kilgo wanted the South to influence the nation, but he was cautious about how the nation should influence the South.

The Progressive Conservative

The wake of civil war left the American South reeling. Conflict caused

damage on both economic and social levels. Resentment against the North manifested itself in a strong sense of sectional connection in the South. The North may have won the war, but the South kept its pride. Through the latter decades of the nineteenth century, the economic situation in the South slowly improved, partially because of the industrial boom in the North. As new business developed in the South, industrialists freely crossed sectional lines in the interest of larger markets. In the South, conflict emerged between those who favored putting sectional differences aside in favor of economic development in conjunction with the North and those who were wary of alliances with a region so different from their own. By the late nineteenth century, a younger generation began rising to prominence in the South for whom the Civil War was only a repeated narrative told by a previous generation. In the churches, young leaders began questioning the relevance of regional denominations in the emerging national culture.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, The Methodist Episcopal Church was one of the fastest-growing denominations in the young nation. Between 1784 and 1810, the number of Methodists in the United States multiplied by a factor of ten.¹ However, differences in opinion soon divided Methodists. In 1830, the Methodist Protestant Church formed in response to a desire that the denomination should divide power between the laity and clergy. The largest split, however, came in 1844 when the southern Methodist churches refused to be subject to the anti-slavery leanings of the northern churches. Eventually taking the name, Methodist Episcopal Church, South, the group represented most of the Methodist churches in the American South. Early on, heated conflict characterized the relationship between the rival Methodist groups. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, however, relations within the splintered Methodist groups had improved to the point that cooperation among them to promote the greater good of the growth of Methodism in America began to seem not only possible, but feasible.

Enter John Carlisle Kilgo. The son of a Methodist circuit preacher, John Carlisle Kilgo was born on July 22, 1861, to James T. and Catherine M. Kilgo in Laurens, South Carolina. On both sides of his family, Kilgo's ancestors included numerous Methodist preachers. Kilgo spoke fondly of growing up in a Methodist parsonage and of the spiritual guidance provided by his mother.² Steeped in southern Methodism, Kilgo early felt called to preach. At the age of seventeen, Kilgo attended a revival meeting and dedicated his life to God's service later that evening.³ Ordained in 1882, John C. Kilgo soon emerged as a promising young leader in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.

After serving as a circuit preacher for six years, Kilgo accepted the

¹ Jon Butler, Grant Wacker, and Randall Herbert Balmer, *Religion in American Life: A Short History* (New York: Oxford UP, 2003), 154.

² John C. Kilgo, "Bishop Kilgo's Farewell Address to General Conference at Hot Springs," *North Carolina Christian Advocate* (Greensboro, NC) 67.21 (1922): 2.

³ Gilbert T. Rowe, "John Carlisle Kilgo: Preacher and Educator," *The Methodist Quarterly Review* 71.4 (1922): 639.

invitation to become a fundraiser for his alma mater, Wofford College in Spartanburg, South Carolina. While working for the college, Kilgo studied privately with Dr. Henry N. Snyder, received an honorary M.A., and eventually taught some classes.⁴ As a fundraiser, Kilgo proved to be quite successful. He traveled across the state extolling the virtues of Wofford College and the benefits of a Christian higher education, soon establishing a reputation among Methodists as an excellent preacher with a clear vision for progress. John C. Kilgo's name eventually came to the attention of a struggling Methodist college in North Carolina that was searching for a new president. Although not the college's first choice, Kilgo accepted the presidency of Trinity College in 1894 at the age of thirty-three. Neither would ever be the same.

Kilgo's identity as a progressive conservative leader in the South is seen most clearly through his leadership as the president of Trinity College in Durham, North Carolina, the precursor of Duke University. When Kilgo joined the college, Trinity recently had moved from rural Randolph County to the city of Durham with the financial and political support of local business people, including Washington Duke and James Carr. Financial support for education in the South was, however, tenuous at best. The college received some assistance from the Methodist churches in North Carolina as well as tuition payments by students, but Trinity needed more money to support its educational work. Local leaders like Washington Duke had been early supporters of Trinity College in Durham, but they soon grew discouraged because their initial contributions did not inspire similar financial support from others. John C. Kilgo began traveling across North Carolina to share his vision for Christian higher education and to solicit financial and political support for Trinity College.

As a young progressive leader in the South, Kilgo desired to build Trinity College into a school of national significance that would aid in the improvement of the region. A southerner at heart, Kilgo was embarrassed by the condition of the region's colleges and by the apathetic attitude towards higher education. Sectionalism led many southerners to assume a defensive posture against change and its proponents. Though Kilgo identified himself with southern conservatism, he distinguished between positive and negative forms. In an early sermon to students at Trinity, Kilgo outlined his view: "In the South we boast of conservatism, and offer it as the explanation of much of our history, as well as the type of our character. There is a conservatism that is commendable—a real virtue—but there is a conservatism that is not a virtue. It is full of obstructions. Stagnation grows up with it."⁵ Kilgo believed that sectional conservatism was a chief cause of the economic and social difficulties in the South. He continued, "The spirit of conservatism about which we boast has produced a political tyranny that is worse than

⁴ Earl W. Porter, *Trinity and Duke, 1892-1924: Foundations of Duke University* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1964), 55.

⁵ John C. Kilgo, *A Sermon to Trinity Students* (n.d.), 6.

feudalism and more intolerant than mediaeval ecclesiasticism. . . . The individual citizen has been robbed of his will, and made the slave of party rule.”⁶ For Kilgo, sectionalism hindered the autonomy of the individual and the pursuit of truth. If Trinity College were to be a force of improvement and change in the South, it would need to be free of sectional fetters.

While opposing negative forms of sectionalism, Kilgo thought that certain southern values could be a positive force in the United States. “I do not blush to own that the South is provincial,” Kilgo maintained, “but I would have its provincialism to flower into nationalism, not into sectionalism.”⁷ Kilgo did not favor blindly accepting tradition. Instead, he wanted to expand minds through education in order to refine southern thought through a national perspective. Kilgo argued that southern values could influence the United States and make it stronger if the South were to engage the nation in a positive fashion.⁸

If southern thought were to gain national influence, Kilgo understood that the South must develop educational institutions comparable to those established in the North. Kilgo’s desire to build Trinity into a respected national institution led him to take up the cause of academic freedom. The pursuit of truth required scholars who were free to follow their ideas without fears of reprisal. Kilgo’s advocacy for academic freedom soon put him at odds with several prominent North Carolinians including Judge Walter Clark, a trustee of Trinity College, who desired Kilgo’s removal. The relationship between Clark and Kilgo worsened over time and eventually led to a lawsuit that flattered among the courts for nearly eight years. At the core of the dispute was Kilgo’s right to express views that countered those prevailing in the state. At a meeting of the trustees, Kilgo defended the academic freedom of the college: “From the beginning Trinity College has stood for freedom . . . Boys shall come here Democrats, Republicans, Populists, and hold their views without shame or fear. Truth is what this college wants, and God alone shall rule its destiny.”⁹ In the end, Kilgo maintained the support of the board of trustees, but the Clark affair proved to be only a prelude to a larger conflict.

In October, 1903, Trinity College professor John Bassett published an article in the *South Atlantic Quarterly* in which he sought to identify the roots of white antipathy towards blacks in the South. Overlooking the nuance of Bassett’s academic points, public opinion focused on two of his statements: that Booker T. Washington was second only to Robert E. Lee as the greatest man to be born in the South in the nineteenth century and that blacks would eventually earn equality with whites.¹⁰ Soon, newspapers called for

⁶ Kilgo, *A Sermon to Trinity Students*, 8.

⁷ John C. Kilgo, “The Silent South,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 6.2 (1907): 210.

⁸ Kilgo, “The Silent South,” 201.

⁹ John C. Kilgo, Walter Clark, and Duke University Board of Trustees, *Report of the Proceedings of the Investigation of the Charges Brought by Justice Walter Clark against Dr. John C. Kilgo, President of Trinity College, Durham, N.C.* (Durham, NC: The Educator Co., 1898), 156.

¹⁰ John S. Bassett, “Stirring up the Fires of Race Antipathy,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 2.4 (1903).

Bassett's resignation as well as Kilgo's because Kilgo had created an atmosphere at Trinity that stood against established social conventions in North Carolina.¹¹ While Kilgo did not defend Bassett's statements, he did stand by Bassett's right to publish his thoughts. The dispute culminated in a drawn-out meeting of the board of trustees where Kilgo argued for the necessity of academic freedom. In the end, the trustees published a statement affirming academic liberty and declined to accept Bassett's previous offer to resign. Unknown to most, Kilgo had his own letter of resignation in his pocket during the meeting in case the trustees had decided differently.¹² The academic liberty of Trinity College was close to Kilgo's heart.

Compared to his southern peers, Kilgo held relatively progressive views regarding African Americans—but not to the point of social equality. In 1896, Kilgo upset some people by inviting Booker T. Washington to speak at Trinity College.¹³ Kilgo believed that it was the nation's duty to educate African Americans like any other group. He wrote, "In the face of all doubts, honest and dishonest, concerning the negro's capacity for growth, it must be maintained that he can grow."¹⁴ Kilgo also wrote, however, "Nothing is more absurd than the cry of social equality between the races Social equality is everywhere a matter of individual choice."¹⁵ Kilgo believed that the innate social equality of people was a myth because people had always chosen their equals. Even whites did not consider all other whites to be their social equals. Because he stood against some of the prejudices of his peers, however, Kilgo garnered support from some in the black community. Upon hearing of Kilgo's later election as bishop in 1910, James E. Shepard, founder of North Carolina Central University in Durham, congratulated him: "Your colored friends all over the south and especially in Durham rejoice at your election to the Bishopric. May God bless you and keep you always."¹⁶ As a conservative progressive, Kilgo sought to press southern ideals forward but only to a certain point.

Kilgo not only desired to build Trinity into a strong institution in the South, he wanted it to be a model of Christian higher education's national significance. For Kilgo, Christian higher education was superior to secular education in that it taught not only academics but character as well. Kilgo recognized growing social problems in the United States and chastised those who sought to solve national evils through secular education. Kilgo explained, "It is not ignorance, but meanness that has wrecked nations.

¹¹ Paul N. Garber, *John Carlisle Kilgo, President of Trinity College, 1894-1910* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1937), 253.

¹² Garber, 273.

¹³ Porter, 108; Hunter Dickinson Farish, *The Circuit Rider Dismounts: A Social History of Southern Methodism 1865-1900* (Richmond, VA: Dietz, 1938), 209.

¹⁴ John C. Kilgo, "Our Duty to the Negro," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 2.4 (1903): 375.

¹⁵ Kilgo, "Our Duty to the Negro," 383-384.

¹⁶ James E. Shepard to John C. Kilgo, telegram, May 17, 1910, John C. Kilgo Records and Papers, University Archives, Duke University, Durham, NC.

Character, not intelligence is the safeguard of the nation.”¹⁷ He continued, “The most atrocious crimes in America are not committed by the illiterate. . . Intelligence without conscience is the most fearful calamity that can befall a nation.”¹⁸ Kilgo believed that one of the chief functions of higher education was to provide students with a Christian based moral framework so that they could live as good citizens. Kilgo felt that Trinity College should seek to develop character as well as intelligence.

In order to encourage the spiritual development of students, Kilgo employed several methods at Trinity College. Each year, Kilgo sought to lead a series of revival services, some of which had a significant impact on the spiritual atmosphere of the campus. The *Trinity Archive* reported one such series of meetings in 1905: “The college community has not for a number of years experienced such an outpouring of the spirit of God upon it as was felt during these meetings and the results have indeed been wonderful. There are now very few unconverted students in Trinity College, and during the meetings scarcely any were left unmoved.”¹⁹ Desiring that no student graduate from Trinity College without considering spiritual matters, Kilgo sometimes met individually with those who seemed spiritually uncommitted. Though president of a college, Kilgo identified himself as a preacher who happened to be called to serve in higher education. While Kilgo showed concern for the internal spiritual state of his students, he also focused on the external implications of living a Christian life.

Kilgo did not view the Christian church primarily as a local congregation or even as a denomination with national reach. Though committed to the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, as a denomination, Kilgo detested sectarian squabbling over insignificant matters. Instead, Kilgo viewed the church primarily as the association of individuals whom Christ has transformed. For Kilgo, Christian faith was to be a force of moral good in the nation. He emphasized, “The sole question then of the value of the Christian religion as a working force in the progress of a nation’s life is its application to and solution of a nation’s problems.”²⁰ While the United States benefited economically from the industrial boom of the late nineteenth century, Kilgo and his contemporaries observed that moral problems abounded. The nation was moving and growing, progressing forward, but it needed the direction of the church to keep it on course. In particular, Kilgo believed that faith and hard work, which he perceived to be ideals of southern Methodism, would have a positive influence on the nation. As a Methodist, Kilgo grew increasingly concerned that the divisions within Methodism were holding the church back from exerting its full potential as a force of moral authority in the nation. If Methodism were to remain relevant in the changing world,

¹⁷ John C. Kilgo, *Christian Education: Its Aims and Superiority* (Durham, NC: 1896), 5.

¹⁸ Kilgo, *Christian Education: Its Aims and Superiority*, 6.

¹⁹ C. T. Hancock, “The Ymca Department,” *The Trinity Archive* 18 (1905): 283.

²⁰ John C. Kilgo, “How Does Religion Concern Education?,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 2.3 (1903): 209.

it would need to put aside its sectional squabbling. For Kilgo, Methodism could only realize its full potential through unity. The nature of such unity, however, proved to be elusive.

The Quest for Methodist Unification

Though the separation of the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS), began as a relatively amicable parting of ways in 1844, the rivalry between the groups escalated during and after the Civil War. The war strained both regions, but it decimated the South. Though the former slaves were now legally free, animosity between whites and blacks precluded hope for reconciliation. Such strong feelings would not dissipate easily. The MEC paralleled other northern denominations and established new congregations in the South in order to care for the needs of former slaves as well as to minister to disenfranchised southerners. As the South slowly recovered, resentment grew against these and other invading northerners who threatened the established southern way of life.

In both the North and the South, Methodists needed to answer the question of what role African Americans should play in the life of the church. While blacks and whites worshiped together in the early mission churches of northern Methodists in the South, the MEC soon created annual conferences specifically for African Americans. Meanwhile, the MECS oversaw the creation of a new church body in 1870 named the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church in America (CMEC). While the MEC created parallel institutions within the structure of the church, the MECS created a new and independent denomination outside the church.²¹

Though talk of unification of the MEC and MECS began in 1865, the discussion did not begin in earnest until the 1870s. As the nation recovered from the Civil War, visions of national and economic expansion dominated. The MEC planted missionary churches in the South, and the MECS planted missionary churches in the North. Both denominations sought to expand westward. Soon, small towns in the border areas had two Methodist churches and two Methodist pastors where the attention of one would have sufficed. Meanwhile, the scope of expansion grew to include missionary work across the world at the turn of the century. Soon, Methodists like John C. Kilgo began to question the wisdom of competition among theological brethren that drained support from both.

A meeting at Cape May, New Jersey, in 1876 led to the first significant progress in the relationship between the MEC and the MECS. The northern churches' questioning of the legitimacy of the southern churches squelched earlier discussions, and southerners feared that unification would simply lead

²¹Numerous scholars have analyzed the racial relationships among Methodists in the decade leading up to the eventual reunification of the MEC, MECS, and MPC in 1939. See especially Reginald Francis Hildebrand, *The Times Were Strange and Stirring: Methodist Preachers and the Crisis of Emancipation* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1995), and Morris L. Davis, *The Methodist Unification: Christianity and the Politics of the Jim Crow Era* (New York: New York UP, 2008) for detailed discussion of this issue.

to the dissolution of their church. At the meeting in New Jersey, the groups established a consensus that each was a legitimate branch of Methodism with a common history and theology. Questions of polity or church structure formed the main points of the division. While the churches were not ready to consider formal union, federation for the sake of cooperation began to seem like a real possibility. By the end of the nineteenth century, parallel groups from the MEC and MECS had begun a series of formal meetings to discuss a federation of Methodism in the United States that would allow the groups to share some resources and work together for the common good of Methodism.

By the turn of the century, Kilgo had established himself as one of the leading voices in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. As a preacher, Kilgo carried a certain moral authority; as a college president, Kilgo was able to project his progressive vision across the region. The North Carolina conference of the MECS chose Kilgo to help represent its churches at every General Conference from 1894 until Kilgo's election as bishop in 1910. In turn, the general conference of the MECS picked Kilgo to represent the denomination as the fraternal delegate to the 1904 General Conference of the MEC in Los Angeles. When he presented the fraternal address on May 22, 1904, Kilgo delivered what some have described as the most significant and moving speech of his life. He spoke of his vision for renewal in the relationship between the denominations: "When courting, I found that after a fuss or two we always loved just a little harder. So it is now we have no regard for section. We are one people striving for one great accompaniment, the salvation of the world and the uplifting of society."²² Upon Kilgo's completion of the speech, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that the delegates "jumped upon chairs, handkerchiefs were waved, and cheer after cheer was voiced."²³ While the speech focused primarily on the moral future of America, Kilgo alluded to the necessity for the Methodist denominations to work together for that future. For Kilgo, Christ had commissioned the church to shape the nation's moral character. However, neither the North nor the South lived up to this task.

In 1906, two years after his Los Angeles speech, Kilgo published a public exhortation for the Methodist denominations to put aside past differences in interest of working together for the good of the nation and world. In an article, titled, "A Plea for the Union of Methodism in America," Kilgo asserted: "The time has come when separation cannot be justified All the issues which led to separation have been settled for all time and the memory of dead issues should not persist with more power than the necessities of vital duties and tasks which call for the combined zeal of all men in all quarters of the earth."²⁴ Kilgo saw three advantages to unified Methodism: an increase

²² "Oratory Stirs Conference," *Los Angeles Times*, May 12, 1904.

²³ "Oratory Stirs Conference."

²⁴ John C. Kilgo, "A Plea for the Union of Methodism in America," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 5.3 (1906): 5.

in moral influence at the national level, a better example to the world, and a more efficient use of resources. Competition between rival Methodist denominations sent the wrong message to the larger community and distracted the church from its mission. Kilgo continued, "The perpetuation of sectionalism is no credit to any part of the nation and it has received the condemnation of all patriotic citizens. Commerce and industry have become a bond of union between the wide sections of the republic and men who have met in the market have forgotten all the feelings of a former strife."²⁵ Kilgo believed that sectionalism was holding back progress, especially in the South. The world had moved forward since the Civil War, and the church needed to do so, as well.

On the national level, talks continued between representatives from the denominational bodies of Methodism. In 1898, the Joint Commission on Federation met in Washington D.C. Representatives from the MEC and MECS formed resolutions outlining ways that the denominations could work together including in the areas of foreign missions and publishing. The commission also resolved that Methodists should avoid competition in overlapping jurisdictions. As years passed, the commission's efforts achieved mixed results. By 1904, the MEC and MECS had taken cooperative steps in the mission field and had published a common hymnal as well as other print resources. However, overt competition continued between local churches within the United States, especially in the South and West. In 1910, the Joint Commission on Federation finally concluded that the 'organic union' of the denominations would be the only way to resolve the conflict between the groups.²⁶

As a result, the MEC, the MECS, and the recently-joined Methodist Protestant Church (MPC) formed a nine-member committee with the express purpose of proposing a plan for the organic union of the denominations. In 1911, the "Committee of Nine" met and proposed a plan that the Joint Commission on Federation then considered at its meeting in Chattanooga, Tennessee, later that same year. Essentially, the plan recommended a unified structure consisting of one general conference that would connect three to four jurisdictional or regional conferences. The general conference was to have equal representation of clergy and lay, but it would not be able to interpret the constitutionality of its own actions. The Joint Commission added a suggestion that African Americans should be grouped in a single jurisdictional conference. The commission then looked to the denominational bodies to respond to the proposal.

Each of the denominations responded positively yet cautiously to the Chattanooga Report. In their 1912 meetings, the MEC and MPC affirmed the work of the group and suggested further discussion. At its gathering in 1914, the MECS supported the spirit of the proposal, but recommended that Methodism form a fraternal denomination for African Americans outside and

²⁵ Kilgo, "A Plea for the Union of Methodism in America," 6.

²⁶ Paul N. Garber, *The Methodists Are One People* (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1939), 88.

independent of the unified denominations. The role of African Americans in unified Methodism remained at the center of the debate for many years.

While the national denominational bodies were making clear progress towards an organic union of Methodism, some people had already concluded that organic union was unworkable. During the North Carolina Annual Conference meeting in 1909, John C. Kilgo joined with four other delegates to ask the conference to petition the General Conference of the MECS to seek a federation of Methodism in America.²⁷ Kilgo and his co-petitioners believed that an organic union was impossible because of differences in administrative methods and the sheer size of a unified denomination. Instead, they proposed the formation of a "Federal Council of Methodism" that would unite relatively independent general conferences. Their proposal clarified that "each General Conference shall have absolute control of all matters of administration within its own jurisdiction in harmony with the constitution of the Church."²⁸ This would allow the MEC and the MECS to work together more closely, but it would also allow regional areas of American Methodism to operate with some sense of autonomy.

Though seeking to limit national oversight of local areas, Kilgo's proposal did so from a national perspective. The group stated that their purpose was "to secure a perfect union of effort in spreading scriptural holiness over these lands, to prevent the arraying of altar against altar in any field in which we are called by the providence of God to labor."²⁹ In this sense, the group proposed a union of action but not a union of administration. Kilgo and his associates believed that competition between rival groups discouraged the growth of Methodism and diminished Methodism's moral influence on the nation. How could Methodism promote scriptural holiness to the nation when sectional bickering among Methodists occupied the churches?

While affirming the benefits of unified Methodism, the nature of such a relationship caused much debate in the church. After working together for fourteen years, the Joint Commission on Federation, in 1910, had recommended organic union as the best solution. By 1916, the MEC and MECS affirmed this general direction and formed a Joint Commission on Unification to work out the details. On one hand, plans for federation envisioned relatively independent bodies of Methodism that would work together where tasks overlapped. On the other, plans for organic union called for a powerful national body of Methodism that would set the direction of the church. Consequently, regions would lose their independence and become administrative units of the larger denomination. Though "union" replaced "federation" as the working terminology of the relationship between Methodist groups, Kilgo's basic position favoring federation continued to resonate with leaders in the MECS. Certain proposals for unification bore a clear resem-

²⁷ *Journal of the North Carolina Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South*, (Raleigh, NC: Edwards & Broughton Printing Company, 1909), 68.

²⁸ *Journal of the North Carolina Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South*, 68.

²⁹ *Journal of the North Carolina Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South*, 68.

blance in principle to past proposals for federation.

As a dynamic preacher and as the president of a Methodist college, John C. Kilgo established a positive reputation in southern Methodism. The MECS viewed Kilgo as a promising young leader of the church. When he was only thirty-six years old, Kilgo first received votes seeking to appoint him as bishop at the 1898 General Conference.³⁰ More votes followed in 1902, and Kilgo narrowly missed election as bishop in 1906. Finally, in May of 1910, the General Conference of the MECS elected Kilgo as bishop on the first ballot.³¹ In June, Kilgo resigned the presidency of Trinity College.

As a bishop, Kilgo associated himself with a group of well-known conservatives in the MECS. By 1916, Kilgo's name was spoken of in conjunction with those of bishops A. W. Wilson, E. E. Hoss, W. A. Candler, and C. Denny. Wilson and Hoss represented the older class of conservative southern bishops while Candler, Denny, and Kilgo represented the younger generation of conservative leadership. Candler and Denny strongly opposed plans for unifying American Methodism because they feared the "disintegration and absorption" of the southern churches into the northern ecclesial body.³² After becoming a bishop, Kilgo felt his formal duty was to discern God's direction for the church and then to lead the MECS boldly in that direction. Kilgo desired to lead the denomination forward but not recklessly. Though conservatives were in clear control of the MECS in 1920, the southern leadership was not of one mind.³³

Though earlier supporting the idea of unified Methodism in America, Kilgo later nuanced his view as he considered how organic union would affect the southern church. When the Joint Commission on Unification met in a series of meetings between 1916 and 1920, it became apparent that the northern and southern churches differed substantially in their visions of the future of Methodism. Since the MEC was stronger than the MECS, plans that called for an authoritative national General Conference favored the northern churches. Conversely, the southern churches desired an arrangement where the regional level held the greater power. At a Joint Commission meeting in 1917, Bishop Denny summarized his responsibility to the southern conservative position: "We are here to see that what is dear to us, the right of local self-government in this matter, is contended for. We do not want to control anybody else; but, as far as we are able to manage it, we do not propose that anybody else shall control us"³⁴ The basic principles that led Kilgo to

³⁰ Garber, *John Carlisle Kilgo, President of Trinity College, 1894-1910*, 318.

³¹ Garber, *John Carlisle Kilgo, President of Trinity College, 1894-1910*, 322.

³² Warren A. Candler to John C. Kilgo, May 31, 1916, John C. Kilgo Records and Papers, University Archives, Duke University, Durham, NC.

³³ Growing tensions between conservatives and progressives within the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, are addressed in Robert Watson Sledge, *Hands on the Ark: The Struggle for Change in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1914-1939* (Lake Junaluska, NC: United Methodist Church, Commission on Archives and History, 1975).

³⁴ "Proceedings at Baltimore, Md., December 28, 1916-January 2, 1917, and at Traverse City, Mich., June 27-30, 1917," in *Joint Commission on Unification of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South and the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Nashville and New York: Publishing House of the M.E. Church, South and the Methodist Book Concern, 1918), 314.

speak out for academic freedom from political imposition contributed to his views regarding the freedom of southern Methodists from the opinions of northerners. For Kilgo, the goal of Methodism was to be unity of action, not unity of administration.

Though sometimes hidden in the terms of local control, the role of African Americans in the unified church remained at the center of the debate. One of chief reasons that southern conservatives wanted regional control of the churches was to support the exclusion of blacks from positions of authority over whites in the church. Decades earlier, the MECS supported the creation of a separate Methodist denomination in the South specifically for African Americans. If a unified General Conference were able to assign bishops, some southerners were concerned that the national body might call a black bishop to oversee southern churches. Such a concern led Bishop Denny to predict that if the unified church were to elect a black bishop with any authority over southern Methodism, then there would be no southerners left in Methodism over whom he could preside.³⁵ Northern intrusion, therefore, threatened the “southern way of life” and its conclusions regarding the social interaction of races. When the MEC and MECS formally united in 1939, the new denominational structure included African Americans but in a racially segregated jurisdiction. As Morris Davis has pointed out, the spirit of unity in the church did not extend to all Methodists.³⁶

The liberal tendencies of northern Methodism also concerned Kilgo and other southerners. Kilgo believed that one should question tradition, but he could not accept conclusions that diluted Christianity into mere naturalism. Kilgo maintained, “[Naturalism] engenders in the Church a weakly sentimentalism which muzzles faith and veneers the truth to please a back-slidden constituency.”³⁷ Instead, Kilgo desired a vigorous Christianity that could be a moral force in the nation. Such faith did not find its basis in the wisdom of humans but in the revelation of God through the Bible. However, some northern Methodists understood biblical revelation differently. Kilgo warned southern Methodists, “Modern skeptics gladly accept the teachings of the Holy Scriptures so long as they may be interpreted as the highest type of religious literature, but they refuse to accept them as the revealed Word of God.”³⁸ If the MEC and MECS shared the same publishing apparatus, Kilgo worried that such attitudes would prevail in denominational educational materials. The only way to preserve the South’s minority perspective in unified Methodism seemed to be through semi-autonomous regional bodies.

In 1916, Kilgo responded to his own previous statement of 1906 where

³⁵ From 1911 meeting of the Joint Commission on Federation in Chattanooga, TN; Henry Y. Warnock, “Southern Methodists, the Negro, and Unification: The First Phase,” *The Journal of Negro History* 52.4 (1967): 288.

³⁶ Davis, 6.

³⁷ John C. Kilgo, “Fraternal Address to the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church,” *Christian Advocate* 79.21 (1904).

³⁸ John C. Kilgo, “Address by the Bishop and Presiding Elders to the Preachers of the Two North Carolina Conferences,” *North Carolina Christian Advocate* (Greensboro, NC) 62.4 (1917): 3.

he passionately called for the union of American Methodism.³⁹ He explained that he made the earlier statement from the perspective of the nation and not the MECS. Kilgo also clarified that in 1906 he was speaking to the theory of union in general and not to any specific plans to realize that union. Now that the MEC and MECS were considering actual plans, Kilgo desired to speak out specifically against the proposal put forward at the 1916 MEC meeting at Saratoga Springs that favored one strong General Conference. Kilgo described the plan as inherently “anti-American” and complained, “The proposition to unite on the basis of the General Conference being constituted the supreme legislative, executive, and judicial body, under constitutional restrictions, is, for the soundest and gravest reasons, a most objectionable proposition.”⁴⁰ Kilgo feared that if the denominations adopted the Saratoga plan, the stronger North would suffocate the southern perspective. Instead of the South being a positive force in the nation, Kilgo believed that such a plan would sideline the South into obscurity.

Because he felt that it was unlikely that the MEC and MECS could reconcile their differences regarding denominational structure, Kilgo now favored the continued separation of Methodism. He continued, “Real union is not a mechanical invention, but a deep spiritual fellowship; and unless there is a fixed sense of spiritual communion dominating the hearts of the Methodist people, no artificial form can cover the fault or prevent a final disaster.”⁴¹ For many, unification had become an emotional issue. It was no longer about just structuring a unified denomination but about preserving one’s core values. For Kilgo in 1916, it seemed that it was better for Methodism to remain divided rather than to unite under contention.

Though Kilgo had been energetic and vigorous in his youth, poor health weakened him over the last fifteen years of his life. Eventually, his health forced him to step down from his formal episcopal duties in 1920. When he rose to give his farewell address at the 1922 General Conference of the MECS, Kilgo required the assistance of two people. On the way back to North Carolina, Kilgo grew ill and was admitted to a hospital in Memphis where he lay comatose for several days. After his condition improved, he returned to his home in Charlotte where he died only weeks later on August 11, 1922, at the age of sixty-one. Assisted by Bishop Denny, Bishop Candler, Kilgo’s close friend, conducted the funeral, which many dignitaries from both Trinity College and the MECS attended.⁴²

Conclusion

As a progressive in the American South, John Carlisle Kilgo sought to

³⁹ John C. Kilgo, “Methodist Unification,” *Baltimore and Richmond Christian Advocate* 15.32 (1916).

⁴⁰ Kilgo, “Methodist Unification.”

⁴¹ Kilgo, “Methodist Unification.”

⁴² “Funeral Services of Bishop Kilgo,” *North Carolina Christian Advocate* (Greensboro, NC) 67.32 (1922).

elevate the status of his native region through expanding its educational and spiritual horizons. Kilgo firmly believed that the pursuit of truth was glorifying to God. However, one needed freedom to pursue truth wherever it seemed to lead. The United States was developing rapidly, and Kilgo maintained that Methodism needed to exert a clear moral force on a national level to prevent evil tendencies from derailing the country's progress. At Trinity College, Kilgo sought to shape mere boys into men of strong moral character who could provide such leadership in the South and on the national level. For Methodism, this meant that the church needed to subordinate sectional differences to its national responsibilities. Methodists needed to work together for the good of the nation.

As a southern conservative, Kilgo believed that certain traditions and ideals were worth keeping. Each region of the country had its own peculiarities, but this made the nation stronger. For Kilgo, the freedom to pursue truth extended to the regional level. Just as it was immoral for the South to force its ideals on the individual, the rest of the nation should not force its ideals on the South. Each region needed freedom of autonomy from the homogenizing effects of a nationalist ethos. If Methodists were to unify their church, they needed to structure the denomination in such a way as to preserve minority perspectives. In the end, Kilgo supported the united action of Methodism, but he could not support a plan of unification that gave the greatest power to a national body of Methodism.

Kilgo's views regarding the relationship between regional and national powers are likely echoed in the writing of Edwin Mouzon, a fellow southern bishop. In 1918, Mouzon distinguished between good and bad sectionalism and wrote, "There needs to be developed among us a national mind—yes, an 'International mind.' While conserving local interests, we must think in terms of the nation, and in terms of the world."⁴³ Through his work at Trinity College, Kilgo fought against "an unfortunate and hurtful provincialism," but as bishop, Kilgo also sought to preserve the uniqueness of southern life.⁴⁴ For Kilgo, sectionalism was only bad when it stood in the way of the pursuit of truth. Kilgo fought against the loss of what he perceived to be the South's singular contributions to the growth and prosperity of the nation. He favored the elevation of the South to national respectability and influence. The South was to move forward with a national mind but without forsaking that which made the South different from other regions.

In today's international context of Methodism, the balance between regional autonomy and international homogeneity remains a matter of debate much like the debate in Kilgo's time. How is American Methodism to relate to Methodism in other parts of the world? How is the church to give voice to minority views? How does one advocate for the needs of those without

⁴³ Edwin D. Mouzon, "A Divided Methodism," *The Central Christian Advocate* (Kansas City, MO) 62.29 (1918).

⁴⁴ John C. Kilgo, "Dr. Kilgo's Alumni Address," *North Carolina Christian Advocate* (Greensboro, NC) 47.23 (1902).

power? Is it enough to give voice, or is voice without power a form of condescension? What is Methodism in the United States willing to sacrifice in order to achieve international unity?

As evidenced by his work at Trinity College and in the MECS, John C. Kilgo attempted to find balance between freedom and unity. While he supported the unified action of Methodists, Kilgo did not want to sacrifice the autonomy of the southern church. The South needed the influence of the nation to prevent sectional thinking, but the nation needed the spiritually committed perspective of the South, as well. He was a progressive but he was also a conservative. In his 1904 speech in Los Angeles, Kilgo lamented:

It is a deplorable misfortune that human progress does not always conserve the benefits which belong to former faiths and sentiments. When men set themselves to destroy idols they often show a reckless disregard for the altars; and when they begin to amend their creeds they do not sensitively guard their faiths.⁴⁵

Kilgo maintained that one should evaluate progress by how well it enables the pursuit of truth. For Kilgo, one should always seek to cut away false beliefs, but one must also have the wisdom to stop before cutting away those that are true.

⁴⁵ Kilgo, "Fraternal Address to the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church."